

vantage point she could hear all that transpired without being observed.

"Good morning, Bianca," he nodded to me; then, crossing the room, he picked up the wan hand of Angelique and seated himself on the edge of her bed. "How is my Spanish rose this fine morning?" He patted the hand and smiled into the dark eyes.

"I am fine, Father, only a bit tired. Perhaps I should not have spent so much time over my rosary this morning, for my knees are truly weak. This evening I shall tell my beads from my bed." Angelique touched the cross that hung on the beads about a carved point on the head of our bed. "I have prayed often for the return of my strength, and I am sure Our Good Lady will listen to my entreaties."

Father bowed his head. "If she does not heed the prayers of such as you, Angelique, then I should believe that Heaven is ruled by the devil."

As he spoke the blasphemous words, a sudden breeze whipped the curtains from before the balcony, and for a moment I beheld a face of such venomous evil that I did not realize for the time that I had looked behind the mask of Maria Pia.

Theme and Variation

Jane Bachman

THE air clung hot and sticky when Marie went back to work that evening. She still had one story to write before the Thursday morning deadline and was trying to finish as quickly as possible.

About 6 o'clock that same evening, just around the corner, Mr. Fink, or Shah as he was called by the townspeople, was transferring his money from the cash register to a little bag.

"Not much here, Mama," he called. "People do not interest themselves in oriental rugs even in a resort town." He sighed to Mrs. Fink as she padded up behind him in gray felt slippers.

"Never mind, Papa. We will make out," she smiled. He patted her plump, dark hand and hustled off to put the money in the safe. As he stooped to open the door, he heard a small rustling noise.

"Mama, we've got mice again. Come and listen," he called. Mrs. Fink did. Then she took the Shah's hand and quickly led him outside.

Mr. Blair ran lightly downstairs from the apartment into the office of the theater. He dabbed his forehead with a limp handkerchief and wished he could afford air conditioning in the apartment

too. He'd suggested jokingly to Ethel that they sleep in the theater lobby that night. She hadn't been amused, he remembered, but then she never was.

Should be a good crowd tonight even if the movie was third rate, he mused. As he started for the ticket window, the phone rang. He picked it up, swore softly, and then dropped it. He started for the stairs and then ran back to the safe. Swiftly he pulled out as much money as he could and stuffed it into his briefcase.

Upstairs, Mrs. Blair with her Angora cat under one arm, stood sipping a drink and looking out the window.

"Another evening alone, Puss," she said. "Our neighbors are gone and things will be quiet for a change. Do you get tired of them too, Puss?" she cooed. But the big cat jumped from her arms and bounded across the rose carpet to the door. Mrs. Blair smoothed her black linen dress and called, "Come here, Puss. You're all I've got." The cat walked back and jumped to the window sill.

"There's that awful Mr. Jones across the street. Terrible and fat. You don't let him pet you, do you, Puss?" The cat meowed and ran to the door again. Mrs. Blair opened it, gasped, and started quickly down the stairs.

Across the street Maxwell Jones sprawled on the front step of Max's Bar and Grill. He wiped his red face and neck on his greasy apron and peered upward for signs of rain.

"What lousy weather," he growled to no one in particular. "What awful lousy weather." His eyes dropped and he saw Mrs. Blair standing at the window. Nice lookin', that woman, if she was heftier and younger, he thought. Trouble was, she jumped every time you looked at her. Funny thing about her and that cat. She even brought it along when she came for a drink in the afternoon.

"Sure don't look like rain. Hard to tell though." He squinted at the sky above the theater, stood up, and then started to run across the street.

Marie stepped from the office to see if there might be a faint breeze. She thought she smelled smoke. The sky over the theater looked faintly gray—still she couldn't be sure.

She phoned Mr. Blair. The answer she got from him was forgivable under the circumstances, she supposed. She grabbed pencil and paper and ran out the door.

As Marie rounded the corner, she bumped into the Shah and his wife dragging rugs onto the sidewalk. Smoke was pouring from the roof of the building and people were shouting and running. She jumped across a small rug and scanned the gathering crowd, con-

scious now of sirens and streams of water. Someone yelled, "Get back, lady!" and she tripped over a fire hose and was caught by a fireman who shouted, "Get them out!" By this time, ruddy flames had eaten out the windows of the apartment above the Shah's place.

She ran across the street and looked up in time to see the apartment floor crash into the rug shop. Maxwell Jones jerked her out of the way of another fire hose and yelled, "Ya can see it better from my place!" He was right. Three fire hoses were aimed at the roof of the Blair's apartment and black smoke churned inside the windows.

"Is everybody out?" she asked breathlessly. Max nodded and pointed to Mr. Blair who was standing apart from the crowd clutching his briefcase.

"Mrs. Blair?" Marie yelled. Max shrugged and then they heard a scream. A figure in black darted from the middle of the street into the theater.

"The fool woman musta gone back after her cat." Maxwell cursed and started after her.

At the same time, Marie saw the Shah run from his little pile of rugs toward the theater. Max reached the frantic woman first and then Marie couldn't see for a minute. She ran forward almost to the opposite curb and the scorching flames. Mrs. Blair was struggling with Max. She shouted something to him and suddenly he let go of her arms and she stumbled and disappeared into the building. The Shah started after her waving his fat arms. Marie heard a gasp and saw Mrs. Fink standing beside her, eyes wide and hands clasped.

Firemen dragged the Shah back into the street and he went toward the three of them shaken and tired.

Suddenly the final crash came, and a hush from the crowd. The front of the building was ablaze. Max, his face ashen, went to stand beside Marie.

"Mr. Blair, where is he?" sobbed Mrs. Fink. Sitting on the curb a little away from them, staring into the fire, sat Mr. Blair. Beside him curled the big cat carefully licking her paws.